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Politics

# PERSONAL RIGHTS:

A PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Delivered to the

FORTY-FIRST ANNUAL MEETING

of the

PERSONAL RIGHTS ASSOCIATION,

ON 6th JUNE, 1913,

by

MRS. MONA CAIRD.

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MRS. MONA CAIRD  
ON  
PERSONAL RIGHTS.

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—I used to feel some impatience with public speakers who spent half their speech in explaining how it was they had committed the indiscretion of making it, and how much more suitable for the post somebody else would have been.

Those gentlemen now have my profoundest sympathy!

I feel that I ought to spend not half, but my whole speech, in explaining why I have the temerity to address you tonight on this familiar subject, seeing that I never do speak in public, and that my feelings about taking the chair are very much like they would be about taking a cold plunge in the Atlantic in early spring.

However, I can't get rid of my deficiencies by enumerating them, so I must just throw myself on your mercy, asking you to regard this venture as a tribute of admiration and gratitude to our President and his supporters who have made so magnificent a defence of the Cause for so many thankless years. Also I have felt moved to accept the honour on account of the scarcity of wholehearted champions, especially—I regret to hear—among the sex which has always been deprived of personal rights.

Perhaps that is just why they *are* lacking in respect for them! And what a warning this is! The spirit



of liberty, it would appear, can be starved to death. Society, having done its foolish best to destroy that spirit in half its members, expects the other half to retain it unimpaired—an obvious impossibility. For interaction of influence is incessant and universal between the two sexes.

The career of women having depended not on right but on favour, they have learnt to care little for an abstract idea which has no bearing on their lives. Only the exceptional mind cares for that. But similar conditions would assuredly produce the same result in men. And—we are on our rapid way to similar conditions.

Now, in a vast subject like this, which really touches the heart of everything that is vital and valuable in life, it is impossible, in twenty-five minutes to deal with it in any detail; and I propose to-night simply to dwell upon the perils with which we are all threatened, in consequence of the present trend of sentiment. For we have to try and make these perils obvious to the hearts as well as to the minds of our contemporaries, if there is to be any hope of checking the present downward tendencies.

It is of little use merely *stating* that it is perilous to try to purchase social benefits at the expense of individuals. To the majority, that seems the safest thing in the world; and, strange to say, the most just. The ancient idea of vicarious sacrifice is as rampant today as it was when the groves of ancient temples echoed with the cries of human victims, burnt on the altars, for the appeasement of the gods and the good of the community.

The idea of *numbers* enters largely into the popular idea of right and wrong—what I call arithmetical morality. Because 100 is ten times more than 10, it is assumed that ten *persons* may justly be sacrificed for the sake of the 100. But that is to confuse mere non-sentient signs with living conscious beings; surely a strangely stupid proceeding. It is this deeply-rooted idea which we have to combat.

First of all then, it must be noted, that, as a rule, the less liberty people enjoy, the less they value or



respect it. The preoccupation will be not with liberty but with the best means of getting on without it. And the best way of doing that will be—or will seem to be—to force your own views as much as possible upon your neighbours—otherwise they will force theirs upon *you*. Mutually lacking in respect for liberty, there will be as many good reasons for attacking it in others as you have theories to enforce. And the same for them. The situation must obviously end in a stupendous tyranny of some kind: whether of king or oligarchy or State: and that of the State, being practically invulnerable, is the worst of all.

I am far from thinking that the motive for aggression would always be self-interest. It would be less dangerous if it were. We all know the deadly tyranny of the thoroughly well-meaning person: the highly-moral person, for instance, who calls out for mediæval forms of punishment for especially reprobated crimes. As some philosopher said: "He must be an extraordinarily good man before he can safely be guided by his conscience." I go farther, and say: "The extraordinarily good man must be trained for a lifetime by the Personal Rights Association before he can trust his conscience—and even then he had better not!"

Of all human attributes, conscience, when backed by power over others, seems to be the most dangerous. Think what martyr-fires it has lighted, what torture-chambers it has furnished and kept busy! If we had only self-interest to deal with, we should not be troubled with the present ardent desire of increasing numbers of people, to further the interests of Society—of morals, medicine, science—even what are called the true interests of the individual himself, by progressive outrage against him. It is this eternal "good motive" that makes our reformers as irresistible as a swarm of locusts, and as destructive! The bravest of us flinch before Virtue on the war-path.

Before they have done, our philanthropic locusts will have eaten off every green blade and leaf of human initiative, and will leave the Society which they so yearn to serve barren and blight-stricken,



perhaps for centuries to come. Of what value to any one is such a Society? What in fact, *exists*, but individuals?

And mark: there is no retracing our steps if we go too far in this direction. We are always assured that there would be a reaction against a too great restriction of the human spirit. But that is true only so long as the restriction is more or less a novelty and is *not* too great. Directly it becomes really extreme, there is no reaction. We can see this in the innumerable nations of antiquity and of today which have remained stagnant for hundreds and hundreds of years. Lack of human rights tends progressively to stifle the spirit that would demand or respect them. Even in England, whose history is that of the struggle for liberty, we have seen how, in women, that spirit has been weakened. How then are we to hope—after a too deep descent to Avernus—for a return towards the light and inspiration of freedom? It is expecting a result without a cause—or rather in the teeth of one.

Like Xerxes, stupidly confident, we burn our boats behind us. Or, more accurately, Nature burns them for us. She seems to say: "Very well; if you don't want to give scope to original minds, you have only to make your social conditions accordingly—subordinate your individual ruthlessly to what you call 'the common good'—and original minds will never trouble you again. Not only will your organization suppress them, but it will gradually destroy your power even to produce them. That will save *them* an immensity of trouble, and prevent all hitches in your boring routine. If that's what you want, it is easily yours."

But our reformers *don't* exactly want that. They like to have it both ways. They want a subservient, State-ridden community of highly individualized human beings, who—like the inmates of Barry's Home for Geniuses—would initiate punctually and spontaneously to order—in the approved direction, of course. No fantastic unexpected nonsense would be tolerated for a moment!

The old pathetic story of Midas, whose wish—



granted by the gods—that everything he touched should turn to gold, seems vaguely symbolic of this eager desire to turn living, initiating individuals into subservient parts of a social Whole. It is possible to have a prayer too completely answered, as poor Midas found, when his best cook's masterpieces became hard yellow metal under his teeth, till he starved amidst fabulous riches; while his heart was finally broken when his little daughter, running in to bid him good morning, was changed into a priceless golden statue. Like Midas, our reformers are short-sighted. Their eyes are so fixed on the Golden Age that they want to bring about for humanity, that they forget that they may be killing humanity in the process—the very spring and life-essence of the human material which they—meddling little amateur deities—are trying so hard to make after their own image.

Our philanthropists will find when too late, that they have turned all that is living into hard, precious, valueless gold—the gold of a mechanical social order—if the gods are cruel enough to grant their foolish prayers!

I do not say that the day of awakening would never come. To China and Japan for instance, it *has* at last come—through *outside* not internal causes, be it noted. But think of the spell-bound, horrible ages of night-mare-ridden sleep that went before!

Once upon a time in old Japan, a man was not allowed to give his grandchild a doll measuring more than certain carefully prescribed dimensions. The paternal Powers deemed moderation in dolls to be desirable, and so curbed undue enthusiasm in grandparents by solemn legislative measures. It is claimed by its admirers that the system (whose nature we can gauge from this instance) worked admirably. Probably it did. So does a regularly-wound clock.

As a matter of fact, the better the preposterous system worked, the more fatally it would strangle its victims. Now it is this fact which we all have to try to make clear to our opponents. Humanity growing fat and prosperous on banquets of immolated individuals would be about as disastrous a condition



as one could well imagine. As a matter of fact "Humanity"—a mere abstract term used for convenience of speech—has been endowed by careless thinkers with a sort of divine self-existence; and, like most divine beings, this new deity demands sacrifices. For instance, the recent medical proposal to dissect criminals alive in the interests of the Community—another collective-term fetish—reveals, in typical form, the line of sentiment (I can scarcely call it thought) against which we have to contend. I do not say that the majority would not still be shocked at this proposal; but that is simply because it has not yet become familiar. Once it does become familiar, the horror will die away (think of the everyday atrocities which *have* the public sanction) and then—as there is no principle of personal rights to stand between the proposed victim and the eager experimenter—the latter will be allowed to take his long-coveted prize. He is already permitted to take innocent, sentient creatures, on the plea of the public good; and it is only carrying out the theory to its logical conclusion, to take guilty ones for the same purpose. And on the same plea—like the lie, "an ever present help in time of trouble"—the ordinary citizen will probably follow, in due course. It is a question of time and sentiment, not of principle.

Now is it quite impossible to awaken the public to the awful and innumerable dangers which confront us all, as soon as the protection of personal rights is withdrawn? Will not even this threat of human vivisection reveal our utter defencelessness?

Can we not persuade our contemporaries to ask themselves if, for instance, the apostles of eugenics have shrunk from *any* measure, however outrageous, which they thought promised the desired results? Provided the end is gained, the individual must pay the price. It seems to be thought unworthy of him to object. Thus he is placed at the mercy of every wind and tide of popular opinion, or, what is worse, at the mercy of the views of experts who naturally tend to think all things lawful which benefit their particular branch of knowledge. If vaccination is approved of,



vaccinated the individual must be. If Science demands human vivisection, he must submit even to that outrage. On what principle, except that of personal rights, can the demand be refused? The outrage *might* result in valuable knowledge. Again, if Society is obsessed by a crude and unproved theory of heredity, how are we to resist interference with our marriages, or being treated as hysterical, or feeble-minded, or degenerate, or insane? Genius and originality generally seem pathological to the majority; and what the end will be of this sort of old-Japanese system, considering its very vigorous beginning, is not cheering to prophesy.

Unless its very absurdity causes a reaction before it is too late, we shall find ourselves in the current of an evolution backwards to the savage state, in which the individual is very like that foolish and much over-rated insect, the bee, hopelessly submerged in the social hive.

As originality is usually lodged in a peculiarly sensitive organism, delicately responsive to conditions, it would tend to atrophy, as plants do whose leaves and buds are persistently nipped off. No living thing can stand the process long. It is one of the shallowest of popular fallacies that genius always overcomes obstacles. It depends on the obstacles and the kind of genius; or, more accurately, on the ordinary qualities with which the genius happens to be accompanied. In itself, genius is a handicap, not an aid, to outward success.

Now in the degenerating society which we are considering, its path of descent is easy to trace. Observe the increasing tragedy of the situation. As the strata of what I call Hive-heredity accumulate, there is always a deeper and deeper soil of Hive-instinct out of which each new generation has to spring. Is it not progressively unlikely, therefore, that "sports" would appear? And if they did appear, at lengthening intervals, would they not be handicapped by a strong Herd-instinct, impregnably seated in that reservoir of inborn impulse that we now call the "subconscious"?

The more one dwells on this principle of ours, the more its essential truth and beauty and sanity is



revealed. It is so gloriously universal in its scope! Just in so far as man or animal can enjoy rights or suffer wrongs, just so far we demand for him protection. We deem it absurd and irrelevant to ask questions as to his faith or his morals, or his "importance"; as to the number of his legs, or the nature of his covering. It is obviously enough that he can *feel*.

We do not say: "He has no friends; let us make him suffer for our good." We say: "He is in our hands; therefore we are his guardians to a man . . . and woman!"

And as a result of this loyalty to the least of our brethren, we should find—if we could but make it universal—that we had made impregnable our one line of defence against innumerable dangers and evils—our Chatalga lines, we might call them, of inalienable Personal Rights.

And in strengthening these for the protection of the humblest as well as the greatest of our brethren, we render increasingly possible all that makes life interesting, dramatic, and truly worth the living: all adventures of the human spirit. A vista of possibilities is thus opened which promises an enrichment in all the relations of life, an enlargement of the range of consciousness, and therefore of progress, to which we can actually set no limits.

Compare this with the unspeakable boredom of the hurdy-gurdy existence of a State-dominated community!

Those who have been used all their lives to the atmosphere of civilization, often do not realize how easily it can be destroyed. The curious change that comes over educated persons who have lived long in the backwoods, gives a hint of my meaning. As a rule, the man—or woman—has in some way dwindled. The consciousness and comprehension have narrowed, the perceptions are poorer, slower, less human. The companioning element has almost gone, and one feels that the common meeting-ground of civilized humanity has shrivelled almost to nothing. And so one can but realize that a certain fine flower of the human spirit—which might be still further glorified and developed—



can, on the other hand, be swiftly annihilated. Humanity, so to speak, loses its level, like a traveller who has mistaken his way, and walks down hill only to have to come up again, or else to resign himself to remaining on the plains—he who had set out for the mountains!

Now, what if this be the reason that civilizations blossom only to decay? I utterly disbelieve in the facile and misleading analogy of the “social *organism*.”

Societies do indeed change, but they do *not* go through an exactly-repeated series of stages after the fashion of “organisms.” It is quite unproved that there is any inherent “principle of decay.” What, in fact, is a principle of decay?

Now, it seems probable that one cause of decay is just this perpetual losing of level. Like Penelope, humanity has always kept on undoing its own work, and beginning all over again. And so our civilizations naturally wither! And is this not, mainly, because we have never yet learnt a true love of Liberty? Suppose for a moment, a universal respect for it such as I have just been imagining: a society wherein there was a real passion for protecting and liberating and giving scope to the individual impulse and inspiration. Is it not almost certain that this incessant loss of level—this destruction of previous achievement would be avoided? And if it were—what is to prevent our Traveller reaching the Mountains he set out for?



# THE PERSONAL RIGHTS ASSOCIATION.

FOUNDED 14th MARCH, 1871.

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OFFICES: 11, ABBEVILLE ROAD, LONDON, S.W.

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## OBJECT OF THE ASSOCIATION.

The object of the Association is to uphold the principle of the perfect equality of all persons before the law in the exercise and enjoyment of their Individual Liberty within the widest practicable limits. It would maintain government just so far as, but no farther than, is necessary for the maintenance of the largest freedom; and, in applying this, would have equal regard to the liberty of all citizens.

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If you wish to join in this work, send a subscription to the Treasurer of the Association, at the above address; and the *Individualist* and a copy of each of the pamphlets and leaflets issued by the Association will be sent to you, as issued, by post. Do not miss the opportunity of co-operating in this work—the breaking of the chains of oppression and the liberation of all the forces which work for happiness and human dignity.

Cheques and Postal Orders should be crossed Parr's Bank, Charing Cross Branch.

Further information with regard to the Association may be obtained from

(Mrs.) LORENZA GARREAU,  
Assistant Secretary.